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## WITH THE CONTRAS

# Rebels press their effort without

First of three articles about the anti-Sandinista rebels.

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ON HONDURAS-NICARAGUA BORDER - Although US policy makers have argued that anti-Sandinista forces could not survive without American aid, the rebels have attracted thousands of recruits and enough supplies from private sources to keep fighting since funding from the Central Intelligence Agency ran out last June.

Congress will decide in coming weeks whether to release \$14 million in CIA funding for the contras, as they are known.

The contras, praised as "freedom fighters" by President Ronald Reagan and denounced as "mercenary beasts" by Nicaraguan officials, are battling the leftist Sandinista government that rose to power in an insurrection in 1979.

Leaders of the largest contra army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), allowed reporters to visit their headquarters in the tropical forests along this border for four days on the condition the exact location of the base not be revealed. The journalists were permitted to wander unhindered through the vast camp.

The FDN's "strategic command" is nestled among steep hills on a site that so far has proven immune to Sandinista assaults. The camp looks more like the field station of a conventional army than the secret nerve center of an insurgent force. Its long, muddy avenues are lined with olive-green tents, and its central command post is housed in sturdy wooden shacks with electric lights and running water.

Nowadays the camp is bustling with troops training in the use of new weapons, cleaning their rifles, trying on fresh uniforms and, mainly, waiting. FDN command-

## aid from US

ers estimated 4000 guerrilla fighters in this and at least four other border camps have not been sent into combat for lack of guns, hand grenades, boots and other equipment.

### 14,000 troops claimed

The FDN's commander-in-chief, Enrique Bermudez [known here by his nom de guerre "3-80"] said the FDN's ranks numbered just over 8000 in December 1983. A year later, he said, they had swollen to more than 14,000, which would make the FDN by far the largest rebel force anywhere in Central America. The Sandinista government they oppose has more than 100,000 people under arms.

Bermudez' estimates could not be independently confirmed. But on a recent morning, on barely one hour's notice, Bermudez massed 2080 fighters from this camp alone into a tight formation, for a review by FDN political chief Adolfo Calero and a visiting American supporter, retired US Army Maj. Gen. John K. Singlaub.

"We don't recruit, we receive," asserted Aristides Sanchez, a senior FDN civilian leader. The majority of the new fighters are northern Nicaraguan peasants who resented the compulsory army conscription the Sandinistas imposed for the first time in the nation's history beginning in early 1984. By now, Sanchez estimated, 40 percent of the FDN's troops either deserted from the Sandinista army or left Nicaragua after being trained as militia members by Sandinista soldiers.

"I was uncomfortable. I wasn't fighting for the Sandinistas' cause of my own free will," said Juan Gonzalez, 17, a draftee who deserted from the Sandinista army in November. Peasant boys like Gonzalez who flee the draft soon find they risk imprisonment if

they try to work or return to their homes. Some turn to the FDN where, they say, they feel they are volunteers.

The aid cutoff slowed the pace of contra operations, but overall the loss was "not significant," in Sanchez' words. "It affected us morally more than anything else," Sanchez said.

### \$80 million in US aid

Since President Ronald Reagan first authorized covert aid in November 1981, the contras received about \$80 million, as well as close supervision and specialized guerrilla training, from the CIA. When the assistance ran out last June, Bermudez says, the FDN scaled down its operations to use fewer men and fewer bullets, relying on small - but often deadly - ambushes. Each guerrilla was dispatched into the field stocked with 400 bullets instead of 550.

Contra commanders said the CIA provided explosives for mines and bombs and training in how to use them. Now they have to gather materials by deactivating captured Sandinista explosives.

According to Capt. Armando Lopez, commander "L-26," head

of logistics, the FDN had to scrap an aggressive advance into central Nicaragua planned for last June, which was to culminate late in 1984 with a charge on the capital. By December, "L-26" added, "we had to abandon positions we had already taken deep inside Nicaragua, in order to resupply our troops."

Maintaining guerrilla patrols miles away in the jungle overgrowth of central Nicaragua grew difficult. Two contra DC3 cargo planes and one helicopter, reportedly supplied by the United States, were downed by Sandinista fire during the past two years. A third DC3 is reportedly undergoing repair at El Aguacate, a Honduran air base that has long been the center of contra air operations.

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As money was short for new planes, the contras abandoned their risky practice of air-dropping ammunition to their guerrillas right where they were fighting. "L-26" said contra pilots flying small civilian planes on loan now drop supplies into safe areas several days' walk away from lines of battle. The commander said the FDN just purchased a Beechcraft twin-engine turbo-prop KA plane for supply missions.

#### **Aging Spanish rifles**

The crunch came in December and January as volunteers streamed into the border camps and arms shipments on order were tardy in arriving. One day recently, "L-26" distributed more than 400 aging Spanish G3 rifles to fresh trainees at this base. The guns came in early February, but the arms dealer didn't come through with the magazines until mid-March.

Top FDN civilian Calero said he rustled up more than \$5 million in 1984 from businessmen and "political sectors" overseas, with no help, he claimed, coming officially from any government. In addition, \$1 million was left in the organization's treasury by an outgoing commander who had evidently saved the money from CIA funds, according to "L-26."

Said Bermudez, "our people adapted easily" to the austerity measures, in part because the FDN had long been more abundantly supplied than other Central American insurgent groups. In early 1982, when the CIA equipped the first 600 FDN recruits, "L-26" remembered, "We felt like we had won the lottery. We didn't know what to do with so many weapons. There weren't enough shoulders to go around to carry them."

For Bermudez, the last eight months was a period of "great achievements" for the FDN, despite the cutoff of CIA aid. He claimed to have blocked the Sandinistas from forming local militias throughout northern Nicaragua, and fought off a Sandinista assault on contra supply lines just south of this camp early this month.

#### **International arms market**

Whereas the CIA once delivered arms to the FDN, the cutoff forced

contra leaders into the international arms market. According to Calero, the contras now get arms by purchasing, for up to \$5000, false shipping receipts or forgeries of "end-user certificates," which a freighter captain requires to move a shipment of arms. Calero cited the example of a shipment of 40,000 hand grenades in the camp here, manufactured by one South American country for a nation in northern Africa. Through a dealer, the FDN bought a shipping bill for the grenades.

"Then we pay off the ship's captain to unload it where we tell him to," said Calero, who asked that specific country names not be printed.

Calero said he can't meet with arms dealers in the United States but must usually rendezvous with them in the Caribbean. On view in the camp were Egyptian assault machine guns, Chinese-made AK47s, Czechoslovakian automatic rifles and stacks of bullet crates marked in Arabic script.

At one roadside munitions dump was a box of mortar rounds labeled "Quartermaster of the Army of Guatemala" in Spanish in blacked-over letters.

The contras fear if Congress votes against them, their credit rating will also slip in private in-

ternational arms circles. Calero claimed that in 1984 one sympathetic dealer "extended him \$1.4 million credit on an arms shipment, which he says he has begun to pay back. Without American support, he says, there may be few traders willing "to take final payments when we get back to Managua."

#### **Hardship not apparent**

Signs of hardship are not apparent in the camp. Most guerrillas are well-fed and have full green-blue, camouflage or khaki uniforms. Defended all around with forbidding Soviet 2.7 mm antiaircraft machine guns, the base includes a firing range for training, modern hillside munitions lockers, several trucks and ambulances and a gun repair shop. FDN commanders keep their boots polished and have cases of soft drinks on hand. In the area

are hospital beds for up to 400 patients, manned by a US-trained surgeon and 15 other doctors.

Contra commanders say renewed US aid would allow them to pick up the pace toward ousting the Sandinista government. "We've reached a mature point," claims "L-26," "to finish this war

in 1985 with an FDN military victory." Calero has said the FDN needs \$30 million to fully equip its forces and obtain the right weapons for a final offensive.

But Calero also says the FDN can live without it. "We are no

one's creation," he said. "Otherwise, if you create something and then take away its livelihood, it dies. That's not the case with us."

**Next: The origins and goals of the FDN.**